

THE SONG OF RUTH

Paint bleeding into paper as scorched flesh, fire or smoke: Ruth Franken's *In den Flammen*. These passionate and tragic works use the metaphors of flame, ash, eyes, arms, breasts and the dark bull of the corrida, to explore the intensely private, the public and the political; hatred, love and annihilation. Her work exists in five folds of time: the hidden time of the series' making; the time of its existence in Germany, in dialogue with Michel Butor, 1965; the time of its reemergence in Paris as *Dans les Flammes* in 1988; and our twenty-first century time, where at last Ruth Francken offers a richer understanding of her work. Finally, the time beyond time where all times meet: *Zusammenhänge, connections, cohérence*.¹

Francken's compelling personality and her luck were gifts; her career was spanned by the critical interests of the English modernist critic Herbert Read, Michel Tapié, leader of the *informel* art movement, and postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard among others - but there was a dash of poison in the chalice offered by these 'great men'.² For Francken should have come to international prominence as a woman artist, espoused by feminist critics, some twenty years ago: she inspires young scholars today.³ Beyond the smokescreens of *In den Flammen* we discover that far from Butor's 'Song of the monk to Madame Nhu' - a poetry of his own erotic introjections - we have here the 'Song of Ruth', her own song, and not the song of another's telling.

'What is burned is the essence of life, in its purity and its innocence' declared Herbert Read in his postface to the original publication. In autumn 1963, he recalls, the Buddhist monks in South Vietnam, living under a reign of terror, doused their robes in petrol and perished, self-immolated, in flames: a voluntary martyrdom borne with 'calm determination.' They were protesting against the corrupt regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, the puppet dictator imposed by the United States on Vietnam, in violation of the Geneva agreement of 1954, when the country was divided along the 54th parallel. Read remarks that all altars bear the trace of flames, and that the bull's sacrifice in the corrida, depicted in Francken's series, is analogous to the sacrifice of the virgin in ritual coupling. His analogies with the bloody and sadistic scenes of Goya's *Disasters of War* extend to the figure of the monk in the scene *Truth is Dead*.⁴ But beyond the 'agony of Christianity' - yet again driving war and persecution - his thoughts lie for the most part with the scenes of destruction in Vietnam; Francken's project, he claims, is to express the 'interior dimension' of sacrifice.⁵

By 1964, Francken had moved from Paris to Berlin, the recipient of a DAAD grant along with prestigious fellow artists such as Shirley Jaffé, the Greek composer Xenakis and the distinguished poet Michel Butor.⁶ With a certain boldness, she asked Christian Belser to publish *In den Flammen*, and Butor to write a poetic 'accompaniment'. Butor was leaving Berlin: he worked from photographs which she had annotated with descriptions. His verses respond fully to the eroticism of Francken's images. Metaphors of fire become animal in themselves: with lips, nostrils, teeth, tongues, muzzles and jaws of flame and groaning breath; the fire becomes the monk, with forehead, temples and veins, blood, muscles, tendons and nerves. Butor's song involves a visual counterpoint of flame-filled

colours: red, white, black, violet, orange - where the rhythms of repeated monosyllables in triads, *rouge vert rouge*, or *noir bleu noir* create a syncopated dance, mimicking the movement of fire. He writes a canon for two voices: the poet-spectator and the insistent voice of the monk himself in his final agony - or rather a sexual ecstasy. Through flame, the woman, both noble beast and 'false queen' is attacked by the bull-like monk: *Ah, fausse reine, au milieu de cette arène je me précipite vers toi cornes baissés...*

And the fire becomes feminine, becomes Madame Nhu herself, with tresses and curls, haunches, thighs and ankles, adorned with fur and jewels. The fleece of the pubis of fire is revealed; in this ecstasy monk, monstrous queen and flame collapse and are consumed as one: ... *Renversée ...Trainée sur l'arène par tes blessures...* The gendered language (in French) implies a male victory, over the prone female dragged like a wounded bull. The bull, now masculine, half-smoke, recedes. The queen tempts the monk again with fingers of flame and her furious song; she flaunts her breasts, nipples, throat. The tension again subsides....

The burning monk images are fused, then, with a female sexuality. For Butor the surface of the *aquarelles* is the smokescreen of through which he and the monk, his alter ego, perceive ideal beauty as evil temptress: the ancient *femme fatale*.⁷ (Let us not forget Francken's oils *Bitchcraft* and *Bitchgoddess* made in conjunction with this series). The imaginary transposition of authorship to the male - who penetrates, *sees through* the smoke - is complete. An erotic act - and an act of appropriation - has taken place.

In 1988 the series was exhibited in the Paris, and the book reedited as Michel Butor, *Dans les Flammes. Chanson du moine à Madame Nhu*.⁸ Here, 42 *aquarelles de Ruth Francken* appear almost as a subtitle. Butor's preface, *Ecrire dans les flammes* briefly describes his encounter in Berlin, then analyses not only his own prosody, extensively, but the incorporation of his verses into other versions, involving poems written for three other male artists.⁹ His concluding section, *Retour*, insists, however, that one 'goes back to the source' beyond Ruth Francken's images, to their origins.

But intellectual sea-changes in 1980s Paris were taking place which profoundly affect our reading *Dans les Flammes* today. In 1983, Jean-François Lyotard surprised Francken with his very substantial *Histoire de Ruth*. Its reflections upon Francken's Jewish history, her condition of displacement to Vienna, Oxford, New York, Barcelona, Venice, Berlin, Paris, Ios, surely precipitated an emotional investment in the condition of exile and otherness that would inform his *Heidegger et les 'juifs'*, in 1988.¹⁰ 'Since the past half-century history consists of the loss of history', he says in *Histoire de Ruth*. Its sonorous title has of course biblical overtones. And Lyotard's reflections engage with those of Julia Kristeva, whose *Etrangers à nous meme*, also of 1988, contains an extensive reflection upon the Old Testament figure of Ruth the Moabite. As Tomek Kitlinski has argued, 'Kristeva reads the story of Ruth as a parable of recognizing and accepting radical otherness.'¹¹ Just as the figure of Ruth the exile, the rejected stranger, becomes the very emblem of sovereignty, ancestor of the House of David, 'the incorporated stranger works insidiously the believer himself, as a "double", calling for an identification with the "low", with "excess" with the "outlaw" ... If David is *also* Ruth, if the sovereign is *also* a Moabite, then he will never find repose,' declares Kristeva.¹² Identity will be mirrorical: 'thy people my people, thy God my God.' (*Ruth* 1, 16)

Francken ultimately realised that in her *déracinement*, her rootlessness, she would find the roots of her work, and her culture, the culture of Wittgenstein's Vienna, in the very loss of this culture.¹³ As early as 1955, the painting *L'Ardent (Désir d'enracinement)* linked desire and homelessness to burning. Ruth's art is thus always a mirrorical return of time itself, that brings one back to the psychic origins of *In den Flammen* and the secret time of their making.

Francken's dedication in the first book was cut from the edition of 1988: 'Erinnerung an meine Eltern und für W.' Her father, who fled Vienna in 1937, had longed to die in Austria; his wishes were fulfilled: he died of a stroke while on a cure and was buried in his most-beloved country. Francken's mother died a few years later in France; yet it was her wish to be with her husband, her daughter's duty to fulfil this wish. After an initial trip to Schruns, in Austria, a second visit was required to complete the process of reburial: ashes to ashes.. Ruth travelled the second time from Berlin; *In den Flammen* came into being night after night, in her hotel room, where her personal burden of grief and reflection fused with her horror at the political situation: a world of agony and tortured protest.

Black pigment as flames: an oxymoron. One is reminded of the 'black milk' of Paul Celan. 'Flash' was the name of this vinyl, water-based paint, 'a black which I adore' says Ruth. Lines and eyes were drawn with a fine felt pen; touches of coral and pink were sparingly added to the sooty surfaces. She chose the square image-format, used wet paper into which the pigment sank and spread; outlines were sometimes scratched: hands in supplication, knees folded in the lotus position. Jean Fautrier's *Otages* are irresistibly recalled, and were noted by her first critics, though Ruth sees reminiscences rather of Jawlensky in the straight gashes of mouths and eyes. While her previous *Têtes* series in oil repeats the format of disembodied heads it is rather Fautrier's drawings and lithographs that haunt *In der Flammen*: figures reduced to outline and matter, a line of ink, a smear of mauve, a touch of pastel crayon, with the Bataille dialectic between torturer and victim reduced to material traces on paper.¹⁴ Almost immediately, after pointing out the black bull of the corrida, Ruth showed me a similar shape becoming Madame Nhu - but upside down (the violence of these inversions escapes Butor): perturbing, and so much more ascetic with their ashen colouring than Butor's variations on a French *amour courtois* in 'red green red' flames. She worked with just one newspaper photograph of the burning monk. As Ruth explained, a thin, doubled curve could represent a wound or the positive thrust of a bull's horn; the full bosom of the female form becomes the raised arms of monks in supplication, or legs when the figure, unconsciously inverted, conflates eyes with genitalia at the very base of the work. (In the *Têtes* series, a skull tumbling or on the ground - eyes and mouth in a similar base position - evokes Golgotha). 'I worked in a trance' she says.

And language? Ruth despairs of the 'terrible constant elegance' of French. In going to Berlin, Francken rediscovered German, not her *heimlich*, native Austrian variation, but the language of the enemy, the persecutor. 'I had intended to study Judaism when I got there' she said, but with a huge studio, new friends, a new city to explore, this proposed act of expiation - a stranger's recompense for 'hospitality' - did not take place. The city, itself divided into East and West, contained its own pain and flame memories. East-West confrontation is a central theme of *In den Flammen*, powerfully politicising the orientalist leanings of the international *informel* as a style.

The exile as sovereign, female as male: *In den Flammen* picks up on these conflicting identities as the artist herself acknowledges: 'good and evil, beauty and ugliness, creation and destruction. How could supposedly so beautiful a woman destroy and torture?' After the ecstatic conflagration for Butor, Madame Nhu's beauty alone remains: *Il ne restera plus de nous deux que ta beauté.* 'I never identified myself with beauty' Francken says; yet *la belle Ruth Francken* in Paris would be constantly propositioned. Her mother, she says, was 'weak, devoted, adorable, porcelain....' She would not be a such a mother.

What conflicting emotions, then, may have darkened her mourning? And for whom, ultimately was Ruth mourning? Had she belonged to a later generation, would she have addressed this hidden grief explicitly? Would she have espoused the theories of Lacan (her contemporary), and written her reflections upon the Shoah, like Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, whose black, xeroxed images of the *Eurydice* series 1994-6, are the natural successors to Francken's sooty flames?

*Each black grain has its freedom. And
Its freedom is also mine. I am lost before
each black grain - Black sorrow - this
loss is in me and in painting.*¹⁵

'Desire, predicated on lack, breaks the archaic identification with, and horror of remaining inside, the maternal body'. Eurydice, 'disappeared', is the founding myth, the allegory of woman in phallogocentric culture, Griselda Pollock uses Kristeva's work on abjection and feminine melancholy, love and the imaginary father to analyse Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger's series.¹⁶ For the artist and for Pollock's text the 'Story of Ruth' is again emblematic:

*Again and again, Ruth comes from
Behind or after...She leaves the space of No
(non-site) to seek truth, meaning, lover, God,
a promised land with an open future; origin
is revealed as linked to the future.
Is what hurts in front of her or behind her?
Before or after?*¹⁷

Ruth Francken's subsequent use of scissor imagery in the 1970s - castration or anti-castration - could not be more angry or more explicit in relation to time past and time future. Nor her *Hostage*-taking: capturing the charismatic 'fathers' of her photopiesces, in which Europe's cultural present of the 1980s and its lost elite, from Arnold Schonberg to John Cage, Jean Tinguely, Lyotard - all become 'Franckens': 'the act of tearing the photograph is an act characteristic of woman' she claimed.¹⁸ The obsessive and uncanny doublings, the repetition of the multiplied profiles of these 'great men' renders them fantasmatic: they flicker and stab like the *noir-bleu-noir* of Butor's flames. 'There are flames going through my entire oeuvre' Francken observes: the conjunction of *Lulu ecstasy*, *Sacrifice*, *Passage de l'ange à l'otage*, *Lulu flamboyant* anticipate *In den Flammen* as early as 1959; the future held the *Burning Point* series, or the eruptive and sensual *Volcano* pictures, Eros meeting and merging always with Thanatos.

And above all - masterpiece in all its senses - *Wittgenstein in flames*, 1991: the agony of European culture burning, burning, burning. Sear of silence.¹⁹

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen

¹ Three words whose semantic fields overlap but do not coincide: see Francken, 'Zusammenhänge/Connections/Cohérence' in *Ruth Francken, Werke, 1950-1994*, Magdeburg, Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen, 1994, p. 24.

² The English 'gift' signifies an attribute, present, talent; the German 'Gift' signifies poison. Ruth's is a supremely polylingual universe.

³ See Naomi Skelton, *Ruth Francken, la coupure et la cohérence*; Katie Brandon, *The Death of the Author and the Rebirth of the Book: the 'livres d'artiste' of Ruth Francken, Jacques Monory and Annette Messager*, M.A. theses, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2002, 2003.

⁴ Francken's series *Pourquoi?*, 1964, is of course a tribute to Goya.

⁵ Herbert Read 'Nachwort' in *In den Flammen. Gesang des Monchs an Madame Nhu. Aquarellen von Ruth Francken mit einer Dichtung von Michel Butor*, Stuttgart, Christian Belser Verlag, 1965, pp. XX. Read, gentleman, anarchist and humanist cites the Spanish writer Miguel Unanuno's *La agonía del cristianismo*. Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem's brutalities in 1963 resulted in his assassination.

⁶ The DAAD grant was backed by the American Ford Foundation - part of the cultural 'reeducation' strategy for Germany. Antonio Saura proudly declined an offer Francken could not refuse: for her \$10,000 grant plus large studio 'It seemed like heaven!' (All quotations by Ruth Francken are in conversation, Paris, March 3rd, 2004.)

⁷ Butor's false queen remains the imaginary Madame Nhu rather than Francken herself. For the trope of the dark Jewish *femme fatale* see Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb eds. *The Jew in the Text, Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1995.

⁸ The works were shown at the Galerie Claude Samuel, Paris, in 1988.

⁹ Michel Butor, 'Ecrire dans les Flammes' dedicated to publisher Colette Lambrichs, in *Dans les Flammes. Chanson du moine à Madame Nhu*, Paris, Editions de la Différence, 1988, pp. 9-16. He reappropriated parts of *Dans les Flammes* for work with artists Christian Dotremont, Bernard Larsson and Jacques Héroul...

¹⁰ See Skelton, 2002, pp. 16-18, for a discussion of Lyotard's *Heidegger et les 'juifs'* (Paris, Gallilée, 1988) together with considerations of Freud's *heimlich/unheimlich* and Derrida's *parergon*.

¹¹ From Tomek Kitlinski, 'To be or not to be a nation', in *Being*, Lublin, Marie Curie University Press, 1998, pp. 48-51. Warmst thanks, Tomek for your help and friendship.

¹² Julia Kristeva, 'Ruth la Moabite' in *Etrangers à nous mêmes*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, pp. 103-111. Her analysis acknowledges the detailed scholarship in Meir Zlotavitz and Nosson Scherman, *The Book of Ruth*, New York, Mesorah Publications, 1976.

¹³ Francken, 'Zusammenhänge/Connections/Cohérence' in *Ruth Francken*, 1994, p. 28.

¹⁴ For references to Fautrier and his exegete, the poet Francis Ponge, see Lyotard, *Histoire de Ruth*, 1983 in *Ruth Francken*, op. cit., 1994, p. 16 and Michel Sicard, 'Larmes', in Butor, 1988, p. 97.

¹⁵ Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Matrix. Halal(a) - Lapsus* 1989, 57-58 in *Carnets (Notes on Painting)*, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1993.

¹⁶ See Griselda Pollock on the *Eurydice* series in 'Abandoned at the mouth of hell or a second look that does not kill: the uncanny coming to matrixial memory', in *Looking Back to the future. Essays on art, life and death*, Amsterdam, G+B Arts International, 2001, pp. 113-174. She redeploys the Ruth story, autobiographically, pp. 347-351.

¹⁷ Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Matrix. Halal(a) - Lapsus*, 1990:74 quoted in Pollock, 2001, p.158.

¹⁸ Lyotard quoting Francken in *Histoire de Ruth*, in *Ruth Francken*, 1994, p. 20.

¹⁹ Lyotard, 'Brandmal des Schweigens / Sear of silence / La brûlure de silence' in *Ruth Francken*, 1994, pp. 39-48 (writtten for *Ruth Francken, Mirrorical Returns, Hostages, Wittgenstein Variations*, Metz, Musée de Beaux-Arts, La Cour d'Or, 1991.